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ABSTRACT

Under the impact of electronic immediacy the world is being reorganized in sensory terms toward the primacy of the audile-tactile. In the educational system, emphasis remains on traditional methods of logical (visual) and sequential learning. The effect on literature is an increased interest in the spoken, as opposed to the written word. Through the arts, the sensory ordering of cultures can be determined. Examples from art and literature are compared to illuminate the area of sensory modalities that are encountered in writing and painting. Comparisons are drawn between works of such artists and writers as: Gandhara and Yeats, the Limbourg Limner and Shakespeare, Bosch and Kafka, Ben Jonson and Breugel, and Munch and Eliot. (LL)

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STUDY GROUP PAPER NO. 10

Through the Vanishing Point

by

Harley W. Parker

Considering the changing nature of our world and the concomitant necessity for reappraising the educational format, can it be possible that an inordinate amount of energy and attention is being paid to "orderly and developing sequence" and, "to rethink the aims and patterns of the curriculum segment by segment?" It may be that we only have a semantic problem here, but it should be pointed out that there are many kinds of order which change from culture to culture and from time to time.

Michael Balint, writing in the International Journal of Psychoanalysis, describes two different perceptual worlds, one sight orientated, the other touch orientated. This is a fact which has, of course, long been known to artists in many fields. In fact, it was the renowned art historian Berenson who said, "the task of the artist is to translate tactile values into the visual." Berenson, however, being a quattrocento scholar, is concerned only with the sensory impact of the visual, not with sensory closure.

Since the use of moveable type in the 15th century, there has been a constantly developing emphasis on visual orientation. This has been, of course, at the expense of all those people in the society who do not have easy access to those laws of organization legislated by the eye in comparative isolation. The hierarchical arrangement of the sense life is governed both individually and culturally. In 1841 under the impact of telegraphy the whole sensory life of the Western world underwent a profound change.

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..... Electric instantaneity is all-at-onceness and breaks down the primacy of the sequential as a mode of organization of thought.

Environment has always been a vast, subliminally operating teaching machine. A person in the 19th century environment was literate whether or not he could read or write for he was conditioned by the organizing principles inherent in literacy. He did not understand sufficiently that each medium of communication silently imposed its assumptions, postulates on which we base perceptions of our world. He understood, or thought he did, the principle of cause and effect and sequential logic. In the past, however, the environments were not designed, they were allowed to grow on the assumption that technology can be merely added without changing the social or psychic life. In medieval times, when man organized on the basis of a unified sensibility, this was not too disastrous, but with the stress on visual bias in the environment, man was forced to live with a fragmented sense life.

Each new technology makes art forms out of the preceding technology. For example, the manuscript became art when the printed book took over and the movies became an art form when television became a salient part of our communication system. Telstar, by weaving a communication web around our planet, has turned the whole globe into an art form and reinforced its function as a teaching machine. It would seem wise to attempt rational planning based on total sensory involvement, if we are going to preserve those traditional ways of life in which we have found value in the past.

It is the contention in this paper that under the impact of electronic immediacy the world is being reorganized in sensory terms towards the primacy of the audile-tactile. The effect of this reorientation on literature takes the form of an increased interest in the spoken as opposed to the written word, with a concomitant increase in a concern with the kinetic. This can easily be documented in works from Hopkins to Eliot to Charles Olson.

For too long, scholars have regarded communication as a one-way street. Their interest has been almost exclusively directed at their discipline with an astounding lack of awareness of the changing sensibilities of their audience and the ways in which such changes will modify the methods of explication. In the world of electric instantaneity we see the phenomenon of tribalization in our teenagers. Painfully sensitive to the nowness of now, the teenager finds himself hoiked between polarities. On the one hand, he finds the electronic media reshaping his sense life in the direction of increasing synaesthesia, while on the other he is forced by the educational system to learn in a logical (which means visual), sequential manner. To elaborate on the above it can be said categorically that the visual sense is the only one which deals in connected spaces. But, Cartesian organization has little place in a world of simultaneity. Being pulled in two directions simultaneously suggests a state bordering on schizophrenia. Perhaps it is not being merely facetious to suggest that the padded cell of the safety car is the adult's answer to this current mental state.

Any culture which feeds on its direct antecedents is dying. This can be seen historically if we consider that the artists of the Renaissance jumped over the medieval world (in terms of form) and the artists of the late nineteenth century jumped over the Renaissance to the medieval and over the Graeco-Roman world to the primitive. The fifteenth and late nineteenth centuries were periods of great creative activity. It would seem that such periods can only result from the abrasive quality resulting from the interface of disparate cultures.

In our world of rapidly changing sensory orientation it is essential that the emphasis should be taken off the traditional methods of explication; great attention should be directed at the changing modes of perception and the effect via feedback on those traditional methods. There is probably no better way of confusing the twentieth century citizen about the arts of his time than by treating them as if they were merely a continuation of the old artistic tradition of the Renaissance, capable of being assessed in terms of the old esthetic. Yet, in practically all magazines of critical opinion, the old stances are maintained wrapped in a verbal container of great opacity. The creative work of our contemporaries is exhaustively examined through nineteenth century spectacles. Recently Malcolm Muggeridge, with all his cheek in his tongue, castigated the Beatles and their teenage audience from a carefully selected, lofty perch as defender of nineteenth century literacy in the twentieth century. It seemed a pity that all that wit was used in deprecation rather than in explication. For the Beatles are much more than a passing sociological phenomenon.

They have succeeded in donning the mask of their audience, thereby presenting to the adult world the corporate mask of the tribal teens.

The twentieth century finds us well into a cultural evolution which, in its explosive nature, has no historic parallel. To insist on applying critical standards, derived from the mechanically evolving Renaissance, to the electronically evolving twentieth century is to produce a verbiage so obscure as to confound both the lovers of traditional art, who seek in an unthinking way to find the old esthetic values hiding behind a new facade, and the twentieth century artists themselves who have long abandoned the old esthetic yardstick.

The field of the arts provides ample opportunity to appraise the sensory orientations of various cultures; the artifacts of any culture stand as indices to the sensory ordering of those cultures.

Stated simply, in all preliterate art there is a profound stress upon repeat pattern coupled to flat colour. These are the direct result of a sensory orientation toward the aural, tactile, and kinetic with correspondingly less emphasis upon the visual. Conversely, art from literate cultures moves toward what Heinrich Wölfflin calls the "painterly." Perhaps the high point of this style occurs in Rembrandt where the bounding outline is replaced by a line that is alternately lost and found. There is little or no use of repeat patterns and chiaroscuro is the dominant factor in colour use.

In a book Beyond the Vanishing Point to be published next spring by Harper and Row, Marshall McLuhan and I have attempted an analysis of the

spatial modes of painting and poetry from the Paleolithic to modern times. We have found that the spatial modes encountered in painting find their parallels in literature, although these do not necessarily coincide in time.

In spatial terms we have found that there are two salient modes: (1) the iconic which deals in multispaces and multitudes with no connections between events and (2) the illustrative which deals in a single space in a single time and from one point of view. An example of the first is Mallory, of the second, Wordsworth. The difference between these two writers can be summarized by stating that Mallory's sense life was oriented towards the audile, tactile and kinetic while Wordsworth was oriented toward the visual in comparative isolation. I shall now pick a few high-points from art and literature which will, I believe, serve to illuminate the area of sensory modalities as these are encountered in writing and painting.

Note: the illustrations (or equivalents) on which I comment in this paper may be found in any good history of art. A degree of extrapolation from the picture to the literary form will, I am sure, provide worthwhile insights.

CAVE DRAWING FROM ALTAMIRA

THE PAINTING

ITEM I

Just as the Eskimo says "Weed in a river am I" so the nonliterate artist might have said, "Used by my brush am I." For the great wave of being rocks him. Locked in the corporate entity of his tribe and his world

he is a part of all the antelopes that ever grazed across the valleys of our ancient home. Involved in the seamless web of being he must find the image which best expresses his oneness with the world.

The Altamira antelope, wrapped in an aura of timelessness, gallops across a spaceless plain. He cannot be running in continuous, connected three dimensional space--he does not exist in this kind of space. For connected space can only be created by a bias of the eye. This is the only sense which can create in man a sense of continuity.

Just as the poem "Beast of the Sea," this drawing was an invocation to the gods to send food. It was a prayer and just as the auditory prayer, it was not intended to imitate anything, it was meant to be. Again, this art was never meant to be seen. Its reason for being was its being.

This drawing assembles but does not connect sensory experience.

ITEM IA

THE POEM, ESKIMO

Great Sea
Sends me drifting
Moves me,
Weed in a river am I.

Great Nature
Sends me drifting,
Moves me,
Moves my inward parts with joy.

There is no question here of privacy or private identity, but a free flow of corporate energy. Here, the people make their world and are not contained in it. Enclosed space as a concomitant of the visual bias could not exist here.

The word itself has evocative power: it is not, as in literate cultures, a sign. It has the same life as is expressed in "In the beginning was the word."

ITEM 2

Gandhara Sculpture and Yeats "Byzantium"

The Sculpture (any Gandhara Sculpture)

Gandhara sculpture which reached its end about 200 A.D. comes from what we now call Pakistan. It was much influenced by Roman invaders carrying the concept of the Hellenic-Appolonian head. Eastern concern with interval was mated in Gandharan sculpture with Western concern with psychological connectives and story line. In a similar manner Yeats uses a description of the East as an opportunity to modify Western formal ideas. The East has always been concerned with interval and this concern is now becoming a part of the Western attitude. For example, John Cage has recently published a book on music called Silence.

ITEM 2A

"Sailing to Byzantium"

The unpurged images of day recede;
The Emperor's drunken soldiery are abed
Night resonance recedes, night-walkers' song
After great cathedral gong;
A starlit or a moonlit dome disdains
All that man is,
All mere complexities
The fury and the mire of human veins.

"Sailing to Byzantium" in the twentieth century has been a purging of the visual images of the Western day. The splendor of the Eastern resonance

has been restored to the arts of the Western world in poetic rhythms and symbolic forms. "Once out of nature I shall never take my bodily form from any natural thing" (W.B. Yeats).

"Images of day," "Night resonance": as sight goes down then sound moves up.

Gandhara embraced Western visual connectedness in the first century A.D., Yeats rejected it in the 20th century in favour of the icon and the interval.

"I have spent my life in clearing out of poetry every phrase written for the eye" (W.B. Yeats).

SHAKESPEARE

"When icicles hang by the wall..."

There is as little story line as there is perspective of space or time. The repetitions make the song a happening (all-at-onceness).

As a means of creating involvement nothing seems to rival a simple catalogue (c.f. The seven Ages of Man in As You Like It).

The Roman Martial did the same thing:

Milk from the flawless firstling of the herd,
Honey, the amber soul of perfumed meads,
And water sparkling from its maiden source:

ITEM 3A

LIMBOURG MINIATURE

(Les Tres Riche Heures de Duc du Berri)

The cumulative effect of a seasonal or festive experience is achieved by inventory or stock taking of iconic components. This technique can be

seen in Pepys' Diary, ~~the~~ Allegro's "L'Allegro" or in Hogarth.

Indoors or outdoors, ~~the~~ and domestic tasks are limned in such a way (stress on outline and flat colour) as to allow each activity to create its own appropriate space. The painting, then, constitutes an inventory of iconic forms operating in a conventional Renaissance pictorial, visual space.

ITEM 4

SHAKESPEARE

Glo. Methinks you're better spoken.
Edg. Come on sir; here's the place: stand still. --How fearful
And dizzy 't is to cast one's eyes so low!
The crows and choughs that wing the midway air
Show scarce so gross as beetles: half way down
Hangs one that gathers samphire; dreadful trade!
Methinks he seems no bigger than his head.
The fishermen that walk upon the beach
Appear like mice; and yond tall anchoring bark
Diminished to her cock; her cock, a buoy
Almost too small for sight. The murmuring surge
That on the unnumber'd idle pebbles chafes
Cannot be heard so high. --I'll look no more,
Lest my brain turn and the deficient sight
Topple down headlong.
Glo. Set me where you stand.

This poem is organized in exactly the same manner as a classical painting from the high Renaissance with unconnected frontal parallel planes. It is probably the first use in poetry of the single point of view to arrive at perspectival viewing.

"Come on, sir; here's the place: stand still."

Here is an anticipation of Wordsworth's "stop here, or gently pass."

Both poets had to deal with the same problem of illusory three dimensional

space which can, of course, only be viewed from one position.

The first plane in this picture shows us the crows and choughs

The second, the samphire gatherer

The third, the fishermen

and the fourth the anchoring bark

ITEM 4A

BOSCH

(Any Bosch painting of Hell)

THREE DIMENSIONAL SPACE CAN ONLY EXIST IN ONE DIMENSION OF TIME.

In Bosch the medieval dream world is carried over into the Renaissance. The irrational disparity of sizes is used to create the horror implicit in a Brobdignagian-Lilliputian intermix.

This late Gothic Chamber of Horrors had, as its reason for being, the awakening of man to his responsibilities to God. Perhaps in the writings of Kafka we find a contemporary analogy, for both lived in times of great cultural upheaval. Bosch was working when the medieval world was invaded by the Renaissance and Kafka when the Renaissance met the world of electricity.

Colin Wilson in The Outsider, talking of Kafka says, "To the men who fail to claim their freedom, there is the sudden catastrophe, the nausea, the trial and execution, the slipping to a lower form of life." Both Bosch and Kafka place their iconic instruments of torture in logical (visual) surroundings. It is in this interpenetration of spaces that much of the horror lies.

ITEM 5

Ben Jonson and Breughel

"Bartholomew Fair"

Enter costard-monger, followed by Nightingale.

Cost. Buy any pears, pears, fine, very fine pears!

Trash. Buy any gingerbread, gilt gingerbread!

Night. Hey,
Now the Fair's a filling!
O, for a tune to startle
The birds of the booths here billing,
Yearly with old saint Bartle!
The drunkards they are wading,
The punks and chapmen trading;
Who'd see the Fair without his lading?
Buy any ballads, new ballads?

Here we find a great sense of "togetherness" born of a festive celebration. This is accomplished by auditory space, the sounds and cries of the Fair. The formalistic quality of these sounds creates a corporate entity--all the fairs that ever were.

The insistent beat is empathic, giving rise to an intense sense of involvement.

The Blind Leading the Blind, Peter Breughel

The alchemy of Ben Jonson and Peter Breughel, like that of Shakespeare and Limbourg, is in a mosaic assembly of the senses without visual connections.

In this picture there is a particularly moving counterpoint of the highly visual landscape peopled by the blind. There is a stress on omnidirectional in the use of the undirected eyes. The tactile linkage

of the figures is, of course, nonvisual. This painting provides a highly kinetic and proprioceptive involvement in the inevitable catastrophe.

It is obviously impossible in such a short paper to give insights into all the possible variations of the sensory hierarchy that have existed in the history of writing and the visual arts. The final examples will be a taste of the twentieth century.

Munch and Eliot

"Hysteria"--T.S. Eliot

As she laughed I was aware of becoming involved in her laughter and being part of it, until her teeth were only accidental stars with a talent for squad-drill. I was drawn in by short gasps, inhaled at each momentary recovery, lost finally in the dark caverns of her throat, bruised by the ripple of unseen muscles. An elderly waiter with trembling hands was hurriedly spreading a white and pink checked cloth over the rusty green iron table, saying: 'If the lady and gentleman wish to take their tea in the garden, if the lady and gentleman wish to take their tea in the garden. . . ' I decided that if the shaking of her breasts could be stopped, some of the fragments of the afternoon might be collected, and I concentrated my attention with careful subtlety to this end.

Here we see a rational beginning turn into madness. Like the road in Munch's painting The Scream, the opening simulation of analytic prose polarizes the world. The waiter is also an injection of the rational into an irrational situation. He functions as a counter-irritant which heightens our perception of the hysterical.

The Scream--Edward Munch

The undulating swirl of the landscape pulsates with the scream creating a proprioceptive universe. The Scream, like Blake's "Tyger"

generates a unique world.

The road in the painting is a rational simultaneous image for the irrational scream. Just as in colour when two complementaries are juxtaposed, so in the painting the landscape and the roads are at polar points and tend to look as unlike each other as possible.